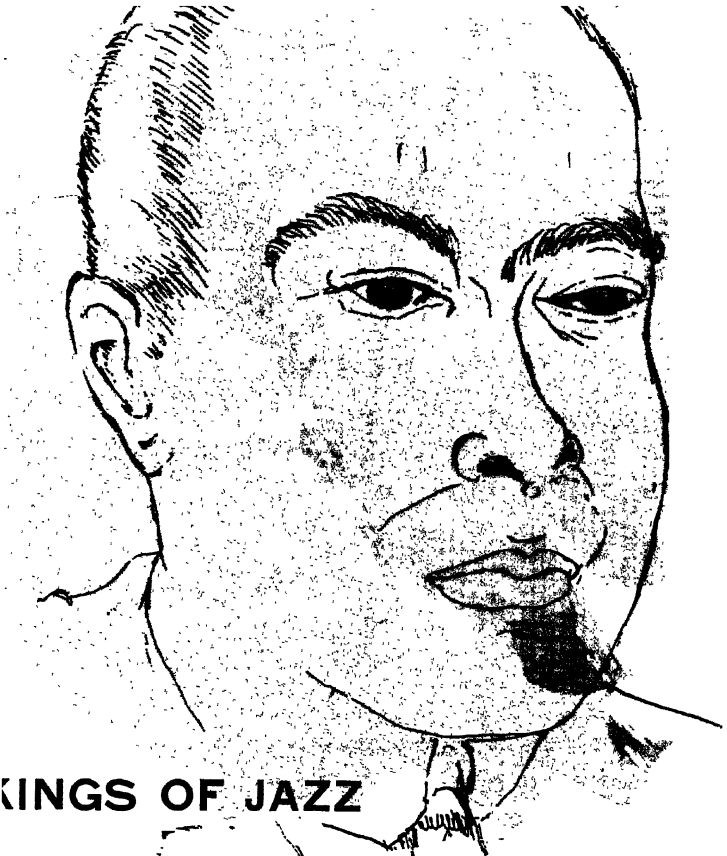
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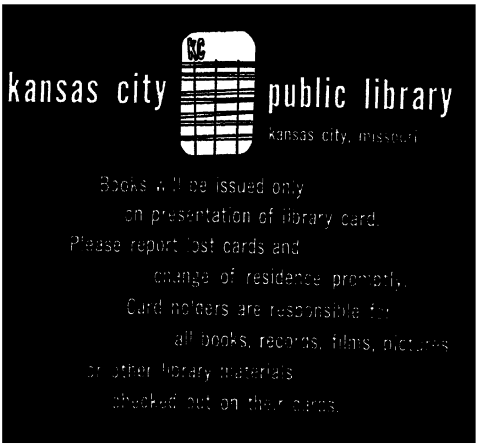
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KINGS OF JAZZ

King Oliver

BY MARTIN WILLIAMS


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KINGS OF JAZZ

King Oliver

BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

A Perpetua Book 

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Anyone who writes about King Oliver—or, for that matter, anyone who listens to the recordings he has left us—should make constant use of the monograph of Walter C. Allen and Brian Rust, *King Joe Oliver*. I am not only indebted to that valuable piece of scholarship but to Mr. Allen personally for making his collection of Oliver records available to me.

One of the earliest accounts of Joe Oliver was the reminiscences of trombonist Preston Jackson which appeared in *Hot News* when Oliver was still alive but living in obscurity. Frederick Ramsey Jr.'s biographical chapter on him in *Jazzmen* (1939) was one of the earliest pieces of real scholarship in jazz, and it preserved much information before it was too late.

Finally, I wish especially to thank the musicians mentioned in the text whose comments on Oliver's style and repertoire outside recording studios have been so valuable.

I

INTRODUCTION

To a number of the followers of jazz in the United States, Great Britain, and France, Joseph 'King' Oliver has become as much a kind of culture hero as he is a source of aesthetic respect. But unlike John Henry's or Stack O'Lee's, Oliver's is not the kind of story from which an epic is made—although Oliver the 'King' of New Orleans moving in to conquer Chicago's south side, delighting a public and amazing musicians might promise an epic of a sort. The details are not worked out nor the emotions refined; Oliver's story is potentially tragedy, and it is in an attempt at tragedy that it has often been told.

The story was not taken up by folk balladeers or the singers on the 'race' lists as were other epics and tragedies of jazz, but by the writers and documentarians of jazz, specifically in its first history, *Jazzmen.* The pathetic presence of Joseph Oliver somehow almost pervades that book and at least it served to objectify the special nostalgic, somewhat defensive, often sentimental attitudes that characterized the approaches of so many of the Continental and American writers on jazz of the period. An even more sugary version of that mythic figure was made the focal point and a central character of Hollywood's first attempt at the 'movie about the epic of jazz', *Syncopation,* obviously inspired by *Jazzmen.*

Oliver's was, then, the medieval tragedy of success fallen on to bitter days by fate. But 'fate' in this story was not so unknown a force as it had been to Boccaccio. Fate was public caprice, American 'commercialism', and the boorishness of popular taste. Thus Oliver could be praised by these writers because he 'set Chicago on its ear' and had the public flocking in the early twenties, and then he could be revered because an insensitive and unaesthetic public had abandoned him. And it

even refused to respond to him when, some would say, he tried to sell out to that public and the controllers of its taste, and formed 'big bands'.

The Oliver myth fits neatly with the others in jazz of the time, like the rather Keats-ian interpretation of Bix Beiderbecke's life that was already prevalent in the thirties and which captured the tenor of those times so well for a certain segment of bohemia. Jazz, like left-wing politics and 'the common man' was a *cause*, a special kind of emotional (not really either aesthetic or political) outlet and here the ageing Oliver could supplement the artist-cut-off-in-his-youth-by-the-crass-world story of Bix.

Both men in these stories were too perfect and too put upon to be real tragic heroes and what we got was a crude and sentimental story of the fallen hero in which the 'public' appeared as both the discoverer of artistic talent and the enemy of artistic integrity. Both myths survive today, chiefly in certain more 'conservative' areas of jazz 'criticism'—areas where the Oliver character could be, and has been, supplanted as the hero of the story by Tommy Ladnier, by Joe Smith, by 'Hot Lips' Page, and currently even by Cootie

Williams and Roy Eldridge. The myth repeats and repeats, the name changes. But in all such accounts the realities of the individual, his responsibilities to his talent, and the facts of the world in which he functions are either ignored or too sentimentally presented to be tragic, and such proto-myths must die as symptoms of a time which commented without perception in terms which the realities of a living music cannot sustain.

But Oliver's is indeed a pathetic story. His letters, from his last years, published in *Jazzmen*, are among the most moving documents which have been preserved from the past in jazz, and the nobility in adversity which they show could not come from that kind of show-biz delusion which was the source of Jelly Roll Morton's bravura.

> I receive your card, you don't know how much I appreciate your thinking about the old man . . . Thank God I only need one thing and that is clothes. I am not making enough money to buy clothes as I can't play any more.
>
> * * *
>
> Soon as the weather can fit my clothes I known I can do better in New York.
>
> * * *

We are still having nice weather here. The Lord is sure good to me here without an overcoat.

* * *

My heart don't bother me just a little at times. But my breath is still short, and I'm not at all fat . . . Don't think I will ever raise enough money to buy a ticket to New York. I am not one to give up quick. If I was I don't know where I would be today. I always feel like I've got a chance. I still feel I'm going to snap out of the rut I've been in for several years. What makes me feel optimistic at times. Looks like very time one door close on me another door opens . . . I am going to try and save myself a ticket to New York.

* * *

I open the pool rooms at 9 a.m. and close at 12 midnite. If the money was only a quarter as much as the hours I'd be all set. But at that I can thank God for what I am getting.

And one can only report the awesome fortitude represented by the entries from Paul Barnes's 1934–35 notebooks which are published in full in

the Allen-Rust monograph. ('W' and 'N' mean white or Negro audiences, the figures give each man's wages in dollars and cents, and (c) means the engagement was cancelled.) Some examples:

1934	
May 9–Williamson, W. Va.	N 1.50
May 10–Norton, Va.	(c)
May 11–Bristol, Tenn./Va.	W 0.50
August 2–Fulton, Ky.	N 0.00
August 4–Clarksville, Tenn.	W 1.00
August 12–Danville, Ky.	N 0.75
August 13–Crab Orchard, Ky.	W 0.75
October 28–Greenville, S.C.	N 0.15
October 31–Danville, Va.	N (c)
November 21–Huntington, W. Va.	W 0.00

or the 'Merry Christmas' of:

December 18–Ashland, Ky.	W 2.71
December 24–Charleston, W. Va.	N 0.00
December 25–Ashland, Ky.	W 5.00
December 26–Welch, W. Va.	W 4.00
December 27–Williamson, W. Va.	N 4.00

And what the table does not show: cars and

buses broken down, fires which burned instruments, crooked promoters cheating the band, constant problems with personnel, competing groups using Oliver's name, and all the rest of it.

And there are things that one can only repeat as rumours, rumours which persist even today, like the one which has two of Louis Armstrong's sidemen in a Southern city while on tour seeing an old man on a street corner, selling what are called 'snow balls' (crushed ice with flavoured syrup) recognizing him as the one-time 'King' Joseph Oliver and being too overcome to speak to him.

2

NEW ORLEANS

Joseph Oliver was born in New Orleans[1] in 1885 in a house on Dryades Street in the 'district'. His family moved several times, largely within the 'Garden district' of the city, between that time and the day in 1900 when Oliver's mother died in a house at Nashville and Coliseum Avenue. It was then that Joe Oliver's older sister, Victoria Davis, who had nursed him as a baby, began to look after

[1]The main source for subsequent biographies of Oliver has been Frederic Ramsey Jr.'s chapter in *Jazzmen*. However, Samuel B. Charter's reference volume, *Jazz New Orleans* 1885–1957, gives a rather different account of Oliver's early life. Mr. Charter's facts in several of his entries have been questioned by several researchers. Joseph Oliver, according to Charter's account, was born on the Saulsburg Plantation, located fifteen miles from Donaldsonville, Louisiana, where his mother worked as a cook. He came to New Orleans as a boy, where he got a job as 'yard boy' with a family named Levy. He lived with the Levys but spent his week-ends with an aunt in Mandeville. His first instrument was the trombone, but he played it so loud that his teacher changed him to cornet. He was in the Melrose Brass Band by 1907.

his welfare—and it was to her that his last letters were addressed in 1938.

According to Bunk Johnson, Oliver was first introduced to music about 1899 by a Mr. Kenehen who formed a brass band among the children in his uptown New Orleans neighbourhood with Oliver playing on a cornet. (Buddy Bolden, whom most New Orleans musicians credit with having started it all in jazz, was playing and improvising, mostly for dancers, and to great public acclaim, as early as 1894.) This youthful band even toured a bit locally and once got to Baton Rouge, and it was from that trip that Oliver returned with a deep scar over his left eye (an earlier accident, it is said by some, had left that eye blind since infancy).

The details of Oliver's musical career in New Orleans once he was older and skilled enough to get jobs in the regular brass dance bands of the city have been variously reported. Indeed, like many men in the city, he probably played in several groups at the same time, for these men were not necessarily 'professional' musicians; most of them held day jobs and played for parades, funerals, and dances as a natural part of a community life. Oliver worked as a butler.

Perhaps more important than the names of the bands with which Oliver played are the names of some of the men with whom he played in them, for they may give us some indication of what kinds of music these groups made and what they stood for. Thus, the Melrose Brass Band featured trombonist Horne Dutrey, as also did the Magnolia Band, the Eagle Band (which was certainly celebrated in the city) had Frank Dusen (only a legend to most of us). Then, in and out of the Magnolia Band, all reportedly while Oliver was in it, were George 'Pops' Foster, bass; Lorenzo Tio Sr., clarinet; George Baquet, clarinet; Johnny St. Cyr, banjo and guitar.

Besides such community engagements with the brass bands (which also, of course, would play at evening dances at the many lodges and clubs in the Negro community), there were other kinds of jobs. For example, there was a job in the Storyville district at the Abadie Cabaret (at Marais and Bienville Streets) with a quartet led by pianist-composer Richard M. Jones which included Louis Nelson Delisle on clarinet, and Delisle was undoubtedly Jimmy Noone's major inspiration. It was during this engagement that Oliver's reputation

rose, for down the street at Pete Lala's café played the powerful Freddy Keppard, one of the first 'Kings' of New Orleans trumpeters after Bolden, and many thought Oliver was out-playing him.

Keppard was also the leader of the Olympia Brass Band, but probably most significant was his tour with the Original Creole orchestra beginning in 1911, which took the jazz music of New Orleans from Coney Island, New York, to Los Angeles, California. When he left, A. J. Piron took over the Olympia Band and he used Joseph Oliver on cornet. The group at Pete Lala's then included Sidney Bechet, and, at various times, Zue Robinson on trombone, Lorenzo Tio Jr. (teacher of so many including Barney Bigard and Omer Simeon) on clarinet. Meanwhile, Piron's dance group was playing 'society' jobs and featured the leader's violin. One might conjecture that Oliver's formal knowledge of music grew as he worked for Piron. Oliver also toured at this time through Louisiana, not entirely successfully, and Clarence Williams was a 'comedian' with the troup.

Williams was later manager of Lala's in 1914, when the band, which included clarinettist Johnny Dodds and bassist Ed Garland, was led by Kid Ory.

Ory replaced his trumpeter with Oliver and began to bill him in advertising as 'King', a title which public acclaim alone apparently had earlier awarded to Bolden and Keppard. There were, of course, many changes of personnel in this group (clarinettists Sidney Bechet, Jimmy Noone, and Albert Nicholas were all in and out of it, for example), and it was during this time that the touring and the closing of the Storyville 'district' (10 November 1917) all led New Orleans musicians north to Chicago and west to Los Angeles.

Early in 1918, bassist Bill Johnson (who had lured Keppard on the tour) sent first for cornetist Buddy Petit and, when he would not come, for Joe Oliver to play an engagement at the Royal Gardens Café in Chicago; Oliver left New Orleans.

3

THE MUSIC OF NEW ORLEANS

It is very difficult for us to reconstruct the music that Oliver heard and absorbed in New Orleans or what its players' intentions were; difficult in the sense that there were all sorts of popular music played in that city, from the more or less formal French and American folk songs and dances of the Creoles of Color to the most elementary kind of country blues singing and playing of the Negroes who had migrated to the city from nearby plantations; and some of the very same men may have participated in and played all of it.

Besides the excellent players it nurtured, and its style, perhaps the most essential thing that the New Orleans music which came to be called 'jazz' offered has been described by clarinettist Garvin Bushell in an article by Nat Hentoff (*The Jazz*

Review, January 1959) as 'feeling' and what is now called 'soul'. Bushell is admittedly speaking of what he had heard mostly in the 'twenties, but he does not credit New Orleans so much with a style (except that the men used four beats instead of two), or with making variations (which was featured in some performances of ragtime), or with improvisation (which is, of course, in any blues singing or playing—or in any folk music anywhere). But Bushell does say that in the face of musical and social trends among some Negroes, which constantly led them away from everything supposedly 'negroid' and into some strange but still understandable snobberies, the New Orleans musicians preserved and spread a transformed, instrumental version of the passionate soul of the blues, and they played it unashamedly.

In New Orleans the music fulfilled the functional role which any such music would in any community: it was for dances, parades, and atmosphere in bars, and in all of these it expressed the feelings of its audience. It is possible, of course, for such communal music to express what its audiences would like to think it felt, but one would

not need verbal confirmation to know that New Orleans jazz was too honest an art for that. We have often been invited to see this 'jazz' that evolved—the best exposition of this is probably in Alan Lomax's *Mister Jelly Roll*—as a result of the coming together of the more or less formal 'Downtown' musics of the proud 'Creoles of Color' and the 'Uptown' blues and church musics (largely vocal) of the 'black' Negroes, some of them the ex-slaves who had migrated to New Orleans. The 'Creoles of Color' were the offspring of French (and Spanish) Colonials and of their Negro slaves who were sometimes freed and given property and land, and even educated abroad. After the Civil War, and as social discrimination and segregation gradually encroached upon New Orleans, their pride tumbled (at least on the surface) and they became a part of the larger Negro community, and New Orleans instrumental 'jazz' music resulted. Probably the best idea available to us today of what this combination of formal musical knowledge and European dance rhythms, and the spirit and rhythms of the blues may have sounded like in early days can be heard on some of A. J. Piron's recordings made for Columbia.

Those that he made for Victor show only what dullness *might* have resulted with less of the 'soul' of the blues.

There is, in the recorded work of Bunk Johnson (both in his own playing and in his re-creations of Buddy Bolden's style), of Freddy Keppard, of Jimmy Noone, of Jelly Roll Morton, a remarkable common characteristic of style which is undeniable, particularly since some New Orleans players—Louis Armstrong, Johnny Dodds and Sidney Bechet, for example—do not often show it. The approach of Morton and Keppard to variation, according to their records, was formal, chorus by chorus, and developmental in larger patterns. Each variation is based on a single, frequently simple idea, which is thematic in point of departure, continued throughout each chorus, and related both to the preceding and following chorus-variation, and (if the player were capable) to a total pattern. Armstrong's variations, Bechet's, and Dodds's blues are freer, less formal in conception, and in the style perhaps of younger men. In a sense Oliver's playing on records represents, as we shall see, both approaches. And, I think they both reflect something which can only be

a conjecture: however much improvisation and variation were practised elsewhere in Negro-American musics, in New Orleans they had been a *cornerstone* of style for a long time, a basic attribute which musicians worked hard to develop in their playing.

4

CHICAGO, CALIFORNIA, AND NEW YORK

Actually, two jobs awaited Oliver when he arrived in Chicago. He played at the Royal Gardens with Bill Johnson's group, along with Jimmy Noone (who had left New Orleans with him) and drummer Paul Barbarin, and he doubled for a while in Lawrence Duke's group at the Dreamland Café, along with Roy Palmer on trombone, Sidney Bechet on clarinet, Lil Hardin on piano, Wellman Braud on bass, and Minor Hall on drums. Lil Hardin described her joining that group:[1] 'King Oliver and Johnny Dodds came over together

[1] All of my quotations from Lil Hardin Armstrong come from her recent autobiographical record, *Satchmo and Me*, Riverside RLP 12-120 (USA). I do not think that the fact that she differs here from the biographical detail I am giving need detain us. Johnny Dodds might easily have replaced Noone or Bechet in either of the groups Oliver was working with in Chicago at first.

that night, and so he said to me he came to work at the Royal Gardens. And he said he'd be very glad if I could come over and work with him. So, I told him I had to give two weeks' notice. And it was a thrill to me to think that the great King wanted me to come and play with him.'

By January 1920 Oliver was leading a band of his own at the Dreamland, and again doubling in a State Street cabaret and gangster hang-out from one to six in the morning. In this group were Johnny Dodds, Horne Dutrey (trombone), Lil Hardin, Ed Garland and Minor Hall.

In 1921 Oliver got a letter from the manager of the Pergola Dance Pavilion in San Francisco. The man had heard Kid Ory's band and wanted him. Ory had another contract and told him about Oliver. (It was this Ory Band, by the way, which made the first jazz recordings by a Negro group and give us the earliest idea of New Orleans jazz that we have.)

With various changes of personnel (including one which got Johnny Dodds's brother Warren 'Baby' into it) the Oliver band played in Los Angeles, where Oliver also played with a large one led by Jelly Roll Morton which featured three

trumpets and a three-man reed section. Oliver later returned to Oakland and soon back to Chicago, despite an assurance of continued success in the Bay Area.

About the band, Lil Hardin says 'Johnny was sober where Baby Dodds was kind of wild—he was kind of the playboy of the orchestra. King Oliver was sober too . . . He smoked cigars, but he didn't drink. None of them drank hardly. And Dutrey, he was a very business sort of a fellow. He was always buying property or something.'

Back in Chicago, the billing at the Lincoln Gardens (the Royal Gardens re-named) was 'King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band' and the personnel included Horne Dutrey (trombone), Johnny Dodds (clarinet), Bertha Gonsoulin, later Lil Hardin (piano), Bill Johnson (bass), Baby Dodds (drums). In the summer of 1922, a young cornetist named Louis Armstrong received a telegram in New Orleans from King Oliver, who had encouraged him years before, to come to Chicago and join his band on second cornet—a role Oliver had played in New Orleans with Manuel Perez, and Bunk Johnson had played with Buddy Bolden.

It was this band which had the most astonishing local popularity that Oliver had ever seen, had musicians listening in awe, had many travelling from elsewhere to hear, and which was, in sessions for Gennett, Okeh, Paramount, and Columbia, to begin the first regular recordings of jazz music.

Much has been written about this group, from the contemporary write-ups of the *Chicago Defender*, the reminiscent accounts of its popularity and power by Preston Jackson, and the accounts by George Wettling of how he and other drummers would come nightly to study Baby Dodds. But Louis Armstrong did not 'make' this band. Again, these are the words of Garvin Bushell to Nat Hentoff (*The Jazz Review*, February 1959):

'We went on the road with Mamie Smith in 1921. When we got to Chicago, Bubber Miley and I went to hearing Oliver at the Dreamland every night. It was the first time I'd heard New Orleans Jazz to any advantage and I studied them every night for the entire week we were in town. I was very much impressed with their blues and their sound. The trumpets and clarinets in the East had a better 'legitimate' quality, but *their* sound touched you more. It was less cultivated but more

impressive of how the people felt. Bubber and I sat there with our mouths open.

'We talked with the Dodds brothers. They felt very highly about what they were playing as though they knew they were doing something new that nobody else could do. I'd say they did regard themselves as artists in the sense we use the term today . . .

'Before I went to Dreamland every night, I'd heard a New Orleans band that played a lot where a carnival was taking place. It was the Thomas New Orleans Jug Band, and it was more primitive than Oliver's . . . It had the same beat as Oliver's—what we called in Ohio the "shimmy" beat. They played mostly blues and they played four beat, as did Oliver . . . After we'd heard Oliver and Dodds, they were our criterion.'

Here is Lil Hardin's account of the attention they were getting at the Lincoln Gardens. 'While we were playing at the Royal Gardens, a bunch of white musicians, ten, twelve, fifteen, sometimes twenty would come, and they would row up right in front of the bandstand to listen . . . Louis and Joe said they were some of Paul Whiteman's band that Bix was in the bunch . . . They used to talk

to Louis and King Oliver and Johnny . . . Several of them would sit in occasionally. But they would listen so intently . . .

'King Oliver . . . said to me one night that Louis could play better than he could. He said, "But as long as I got him with me, he won't be able to get ahead of me. I'll still be king".'

By the spring of 1923, this band had, with some personnel changes, a chance to tour and to record. Lil Hardin has described their first of several sessions.

'Then we got the record date . . . At the first session—we were recording in a great big horn then, you know the style then. And the band was around the horn. And Louis was there, right there, as he always was, right next to Joe. It didn't work out. You couldn't hear Joe's playing. So they moved Louis 'way over in the corner, away from the band. Louis was standing over there looking so lonesome. He . . . thought it was bad for him to have to be away from the band. He was looking so sad. And I'd look at him and smile—you know. That's the only way they could get the balance. Louis was, well he was at least twelve or fifteen feet from us on the whole session.'

Then there were tours the next year on the Orpheum Theatre circuit through Ohio, Wisconsin, Michigan, even Pennsylvania, but now with Zue Robinson, then John Lindsey in for Dutrey, Buster Bailey, then Albert Nicholas and Rudy Jackson on reeds; Charlie Jackson on bass sax, Bud Scott on banjo and 'Snags' Jones on drums as replacements in the group. Lil Hardin explained it, 'Johnny Dodds found out that Joe had been collecting $95 for each member of the band, while he had been paying us $75. So naturally he had been making $20 a week a piece off of us for I don't know how long. So Johnny Dodds and Baby Dodds, they threatened to beat Joe up. So Joe brought his pistol every night to work in his trumpet case in case anything happened. Everybody gave in the notice except Louis. Louis always was so crazy about Joe, you know he was his idol, so he wouldn't quit. If Louis didn't quit, so naturally I wouldn't quit. So Louis and I stayed with Joe. Now that is why you don't find Dutrey, Johnny Dodds, and Baby Dodds on this Eastern tour with us. He had to replace everybody except Louis and myself.'

In the summer of 1924, Louis Armstrong left

Oliver, first to play with Ollie Powers at the Dreamland for three months and then to New York in September to join Fletcher Henderson. Oliver had returned to the Lincoln Gardens in June 1924.

It is often said that the next Oliver bands to record, known on records as the 'Dixie Syncopators' or 'Savannah Syncopators' were, in their use of a reed section and written arrangements, an effort at commercialism. On the other hand, reed sections, *with saxophones*, had been in New Orleans groups (and not just the 'legitimate' Downtown ones), in the riverboat bands, in the Morton bands previously mentioned (and on his earliest band records), in many Chicago groups, in the 1919 group Oliver had led at a Liberty Bond Drive, and in the group Oliver had just taken on tour in 1924. It seems very likely that in that earlier group on the 1924 tour and in the one Oliver now took into the Lincoln Gardens (which at first had Buster Bailey on clarinet and alto saxophone, Rudy Jackson on tenor saxophone and Charlie Jackson on bass saxophone) some basis for his future styles (however much these styles may have owed to conventional dance bands of the time and his own past) was laid. However

much polyphony was employed and continued to be, more conventional, solo and section work must have been used before the Syncopators. Indeed, it had been all along Oliver's bands; there are such harmonized passages as those on the Creole Jazz Band's version of *Chatanooga Stomp*, for example. But to call these changes evolutionary and inevitable is not to call them improvements, of course.

Business was not good, the personnel changed, the band tried to get outside jobs, and in September 1924, Oliver left the group in charge of Bob Shoffner, his second cornet, to go to New York to try to get a recording contract. He failed and on his return the Gardens was open only three days a week.

By late December, a redecorated Lincoln Gardens and a re-vamped Oliver band, but with the same basic instrumentation, was ready to open. In it were Lee Collins, Paul Barbarin, and, fresh from New Orleans, Nicholas and Barney Bigard on reeds, and Luis Russell. But this group never played. On the day it was to open, the Gardens caught fire.

Oliver, with a band and no place to use it, took



Duncan Schiedt

Oliver and Creole Jazz Band 1921—California
Left to right: Minor Hall, Honore Dutrey, Oliver, Lil Hardin, David Jones, Johnny Dodds, Jimmy Palao, Ed Garland

Oliver's Dixie Syncopators 1925—Chicago
Geo. Filhe, Bert Cobb, Bud Scott, Paul Barbarin, Darnell Howard, Oliver, Albert Nicholas, Bob Schoffner, Barney Bigard, Luis Russell

Duncan Schiedt



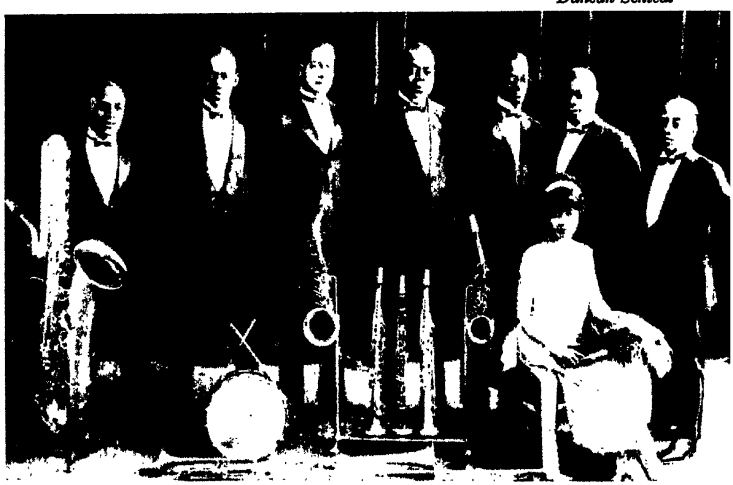


Duncan Schiedt

Chicago 1923
Baby Dodds, Honore Dutrey, Oliver, Armstrong, Bill Johnson, Johnny Dodds, Lil Hardin

King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band 1924
Chas Jackson, Clifford 'Snags' Jones, Buster Bailey, King Oliver, Zue Robertson, Louis Armstrong, Rudy Jackson, Lil Armstrong

Duncan Schiedt



a chair as the 'World's Greatest Jazz Cornetist' with Dave Payton's Symphonic Syncopators at the Plantation Café. There he apparently kept his music book stubbornly closed, played his parts by ear, and very soon had arranged an engagement there at the Plantation for his own group—perhaps his real objective in the first place. That job lasted for two years, and saw such men as Tommy Ladnier and Kid Ory in a changing personnel.

In March 1926, Oliver got a contract to record regularly for the Vocalion 'race' series. The labels read 'electrically recorded', and 'King Oliver and his Dixie Syncopators'. There were some decided 'hits' between 1926 and 1928 in this series: *Snag It*, *Sugarfoot Stomp* (the earlier *Dippermouth Blues* retitled), *Someday Sweetheart*, *Deadman Blues*, *West End Blues*, and on such records as these, and not earlier ones, Oliver's national *public* reputation and popularity was largely made, of course.

In March 1927, the Plantation was closed, possibly by the police, and just as it was scheduled to re-open, a fire destroyed it. Oliver took to the road, playing at college dances and brief engagements in Milwaukee, Detroit, and St. Louis.

The band was stranded in St. Louis, but by May 1927, headlines in the *Chicago Defender* announced the band's arrival in New York with 'King Oliver made good at Savoy'.

In 1927, as in every year until the late forties, the Savoy Ballroom was a testing ground for any Negro orchestra. Oliver was there for two weeks and was hardly a failure, although such an engagement probably does not warrant so blatant a claim as the *Defender*'s, 'King Oliver takes New York by storm'. The men had arrived by the cheapest and slowest trains, just in time to go directly on to the bandstand, still tired and dirty from a long trip.

One night engagements in the New York City/ New Jersey area followed, and then came what turned out to be opportunity knocking. A new night club, to be called The Cotton Club, was to open and Oliver's band was offered the job of providing the house band for dancing, floor shows, and, as it turned out, a radio wire which would spread the music across the United States. Oliver, again proud and stubborn, decided his name and his orchestra were worth more money than the Club was offering and refused the offer; the job

went to a young man from Washington D.C. named 'Duke' Ellington, who stayed for three years.

Oliver played briefly in some major cities in the east (Philadelphia, Washington, Baltimore), but soon his men had drifted away except for a nucleus of three or four musicians.

For three years, Oliver had no band or, as one musician put it, the only band, office, or engagements he had were in his hat. He did keep his recording dates up for Vocalion–Brunswick, to be sure, but by the end of 1928 was using Luis Russell's band, or Elmer Snowden's as his own for recordings, or simply picking up the best men he could find. At the same time, Oliver was recording on his own with various Clarence Williams groups.

In late 1928, Oliver had, through the efforts of agent Harrison Smith, a new recording contract (and $1,000 advance) and one that most leaders would have envied him for. It was with Victor, a large and powerful company then as now. But Jimmy O'Keefe at Vocalion–Brunswick had largely let Oliver have his own way with his own records; Victor, he soon learned, was not so liberal towards

him. Another characteristic of the Victor series is that, although there are many trumpet solos by Oliver, there are also many by other trumpeters and that a great deal of the work in assembling and organizing the bands, and much of the composing and arranging was done by Oliver's nephew trumpeter Dave Nelson.

The Victor contract kept him going, but Oliver did get a few jobs in the New York area, and there was a tour into the Mid-west in 1930. On it Oliver refused to play his Victor repertoire, the group was stranded in Kansas City, and Oliver was taken ill in Wichita for three months. But he had still refused jobs in Chicago and New Orleans because he did not like the terms offered. (Louis Armstrong and Earl Hines accepted two of those jobs.)

By the end of 1930, Oliver was in New York, the Victor contract was up, the band had broken up, and Dave Nelson left with many arrangements which he had made but had not been paid for.

5

SEVEN YEARS 'ON THE ROAD'

But the next year Oliver had a new band, composed of younger men, and went off on a tour of the South and South-west. One might say that Oliver spent the rest of his life making this tour. In the beginning it was a comparatively good tour, but soon salaries were being cut and musicians were leaving.

Joseph Oliver had apparently been one of those who were 'born an old man'. As some men do, he conducted himself as though he were at least middle-aged nearly all his life. Pianist Don Kirkpatrick has spoken of how he sat almost sullenly in front of his band when it opened at the Savoy, with soft slippers on his feet, speaking shortly and gruffly to his men, and stood only for his own solos. But by now he was prematurely ageing

in more than conduct. He had pyorrhœa, his gums bled, and his teeth were coming out—and if that story about Oliver's keeping a bucket of sugar water for the band to drink from at the Lincoln Gardens is true, little wonder that they did. Therefore, he could play less and less. And he had heart trouble and frequent colds.

It was during this period, this seven-year 'tour' of the South and South-west, confounded by the Depression, that the letters and the log book we have quoted above were written. Personnel changed, cars and buses broke down, engagements were broken, jobs were played without pay, and fires destroyed equipment. But always Oliver managed to keep up a front: a public one that meant keeping uniforms neat and clean and a private one that he would 'get back to New York' or 'a new door would open soon'. But the realities of life included the night the bus broke down in the West Virginia mountains and, to keep warm, the men had to burn the tyres. And the fleeting encouragement of a radio wire at one engagement. (The band could play it over but their singer, Rudy McDonald, couldn't use it; such are the strange ways of Jim Crow.)

By 1935, Oliver could no longer play, but the touring, such as it was, continued. In 1936, his headquarters were in Savannah. He had not enough clothes, he was ill. Again, there was still some touring, but in his last year, he ran a fruit stand and later worked fifteen hours a day as janitor in a pool hall.

On Friday, 8 April 1938, Joseph 'King' Oliver died of cerebral hæmorrhage. His sister spent her rent money to have his body brought to New York. On 12th April Louis Armstrong, Clarence Williams and a loyal group of musician friends saw him buried at Woodlawn Cemetery, the Bronx, New York. There was no headstone on his grave.

OLIVER'S RECORDINGS

I

THE CREOLE JAZZ BAND

King Oliver's is indeed a pathetic story and the medieval writer was not wrong in holding that such tales of the caprice of fortune have their meaning for us all. One could probably find many biographies that are about as pathetic and exemplary as Oliver's, although one might find few men with his fortitude and dignity. But the Oliver that exists for most of us exists through recordings. We are interested in his music; that is what makes us interested in his biography and not the other way round. And we are interested in his music, not so much as an historical or social 'document', not only as precedent for what followed it, but

first because some of it survives today as valid and meaningful musical art. And it is a music whose emotional content would not brook for a moment the nostalgia or the sentimentality with which Oliver's story is sometimes told.

In the recorded history of jazz (all forty odd years of it!) there are certain groups of celebrated recordings: the Hot Fives–Sevens of Louis Armstrong, the early Jelly Roll Morton Red Hot Peppers, the Ellington's of 1938–40, the Basie records of 1936–39, the seven 1945 Gillespie–Parker records, the twelve Miles Davis Capitols, for examples. And one of the first—the King Oliver Creole Jazz Band records for Gennett, Paramount, Okeh, and Columbia. These are celebrated, first, for the reason that I have said that the band was celebrated: with a certain degree of musical sophistication they preserve and extend the strong and unique emotional content of Negro folk music. A music, then, which had instrumental and ensemble skill (often of a unique sort to be sure) and deeply expressive content. But there are details which are important: the integration of parts and individuals in its dense, often polyphonic, textures; the sureness and control in choice of

tempos; the ease and firmness with which the group could project excitement. These men knew that one does not artistically imitate or re-create an emotion simply by feeling it himself.

I am going to quote at some length from a recent critique by Larry Gushee (in *The Jazz Review* for November 1958) of a group of these recordings because it seems to me an excellent account not only of what many have felt about them but of what they mean to one perceptive listener as well.

> 'There have been blessed few bands that have ever played together like Joe Oliver's . . . If a band can be said to have a clearly recognizable and highly original sound, it must consist of something more than the arithmetic sum of a certain number of individual styles. I suspect that the *sine qua non* is discipline; which chiefly finds expression as consistency and limitation. . . . Begin with a group of musicians out of the common run, who are guided by some dominant principle or personality and the resultant sound will be truly unique, pleasing to the ears because it is musical, to the soul because it is integral. . . . And so these recordings, in their way, are

a norm and object lesson of what a jazz band needs to be great. . . .

'Whether the tempos, so often felicitous, were Joe Oliver's independent choice, or determined by prevailing dance style, I cannot know . . . (But) the tempos . . . never exceeded the players' technical limitations . . . I am sure that this accounts for much of the superb swing of the Creole band.

'But even more important is the manner in which the separate beats of the measure are accented . . . a truly flat four-four. . . .

'The truly phenomenal rhythmic momentum generated by Oliver is just as much dependent on *continuity* of rhythmic pulse—only reinforced by uniformity of accentuation in the rhythm section and relaxed playing. . . . One never feels that, with a little less control, a break or an entire chorus would fall into musical *bizarrerie*. Oliver's swing is exciting after a different fashion: it is predictable, positive, and consistent. Only rarely is the total *manqué*, as in *Froggie Moore*, where the stop-and-go character of the tune makes consistency more difficult. . . .

'Its consistency is . . . largely the result of Oliver's personal conception of a band sound. How much he moulded the musicians to fit the ideal pattern of his own imagination or how much he chose them with the knowledge that they would fit in . . . is something we can't determine. . . . We have no record of how Louis sounded before he came to Chicago —we know he is full of the spirit of King Joe although their ideas of instrumental tone were divergent. Johnny Dodds's rare gift [is] of phrasing, his ability to use his clarinet to bridge the gap between trumpet phrases . . . and to place the final note of his phrase on the beginning of a trumpet phrase. . . .

'The impression of consistence is made all the stronger by the refusal of the musicians to permit themselves too much freedom. In successive choruses of a tune Oliver's side-men often play the same part . . . with only slight variation—notice trombonist Horne Dutrey in *Froggie Moore*, especially; Dodds in the same tune and in *Snake Rag* . . . Dutrey . . . often plays a pretty strict harmony part, but . . . his mannerisms, his agility and grace, are strictly his own. . . .

'A riff produces somewhat the same kind of excitement as does Oliver's "consistency" stemming ultimately from the irritation born of sameness and expectation of change unfulfilled . . . the excitement of riffs, however, is bought too cheap . . . most effective in the physical presence of a band. The Creole Band's way is less obvious, more complex, and, in the long run makes a *record* that remains satisfying year after year.

'. . . The Creole Jazz Band . . . sets the standard (possibly, who knows, only because of an historical accident) for all kinds of jazz that do not base their excellence on individual expressiveness, but on form and *shape* achieved through control and balance.

'. . . I love this band and its myth, the perfection it stands for and almost is, its affirmation and integrity, the sombre stride of *Riverside Blues*, the steady roll of *Southern Stomps*, the rock of *Canal Street Blues*, the headlong spirit of *Weather Bird Rag*. . . . This band . . . was one of the very best that jazz has ever known.'

It was indeed a band of integrated self-subordinated discipline. But it was that, not in the sense that Morton, or Ellington, or John Lewis, have made groups of fine players produce a music of disciplined *form*. Oliver's was a band of *players*, first of all, but players who happened to be able to play together superbly (the several changes of personnel on records in 1923 did not affect this much either, notice); Oliver's was still 'a blowing group' as the expression now goes. That is why it is hard to single out this or that performance as especially good. To be sure, one record is better than another, one of three versions of *Mabel's Dream* may be better than the others, but we could pick out no single masterpiece that seems to fulfil most of what this band intended or had to offer, as we can say of Morton's *Dead Man Blues* or *Kansas City Stomps*, or of Ellington's *Ko-Ko* or *Concerto For Cootie*. This band achieved its best simply by playing *together*—simply by being and doing.

Nevertheless, one can delight in details: the marvellous interplay of Oliver and Armstrong (marvellous the first and the fiftieth time) on the Paramount *Riverside Blues;* following Dodds throughout *Canal Street;* noticing the way Lil

Armstrong and the rhythm instruments, sometimes led by Dutrey, will momentarily use syncopated tango rhythms with a wonderful secret knowledge about just when to start it and when to stop it for perfect effect—hear *Weather Bird Rag* and *Mandy Lee Blues*, or what happens behind Oliver's really splendid final choruses on *Alligator Hop*.

But, despite the fact that it was basically a sublimely co-operative blowing group, there are effects of arrangement and sequence that show it could go beyond that towards form in another sense. Performances on records are undoubtedly not like those done in person and the cutting down of pieces for record length is often very well done, especially on multi-thematic compositions. Take *Froggie Moore:* the pacing of themes, the placement of Armstrong's solo, however much it owes to composer Morton's own scheme, seem perfectly balanced for the length of the performance. Or take the detail of handling of the trio on *Chatanooga Stomp:* the theme statement comes suddenly in harmony between a muted Oliver and Jimmy Noone. They play gradually with less perfect unity deliberately (or at least in effect) in order

to prepare for the following polyphonic variation, one that seems so excitingly wild but, under the surface, is perfectly controlled and sure—and at this fast tempo. And the way the variation is introduced: by the cornet (it's Armstrong—or is it Oliver?) breaking through at the last note of the theme-statement filling in the 'empty' bars, announcing to the whole band that it is time to improvise together for thirty-two bars—beginning HERE. He hits the note on the first chord of the second trio chorus, already joined, it seems, by the other cornet who could not wait to begin the interplay.

It is unfortunate and unfair for both men that in most accounts of New Orleans jazz that the 1926–28 records of Morton's Red Hot Peppers and those of Oliver's Creole Band are lumped together as exponents of 'New Orleans style'. Morton's conception was different in basic respects: more formal, sophisticated, learned. Beside Morton's masterful integrations of solo, harmonized ensembles, polyphonic interludes (in two, three, or four parts), and concepts of total form, Oliver's, despite the arranged effects, was the music of a fine blues band which played some jazz-style marches

as well. Morton's music has the form of a director–leader–composer where in each part is a function of a compositionally conceived whole; Oliver's the form of improvisers working together wherein each man is a function of a group of fine players.

There are other differences: Morton's rhythmic conception is older than Oliver's, closer to ragtime (he handled it perfectly and with swing), at the same time that his compositional and formal ideas were advanced beyond anyone else's in jazz that we know of.

But to make such distinctions is not necessarily to give them relative value. Oliver's way (and his band's way) was his own way, the one that led him to produce music. An art needs all approaches. An art even needs approaches which fail, of course, but neither Morton nor Oliver did that.

Some idea of what a marvellous experience this band must have been and a wonderful way for us to get 'inside' its music (and also to help our ears with the limitations of 1923 recording) comes from the fact that the group did some of the same pieces more than once on records. If we carefully hear and compare the Gennett and Okeh versions of *Snake Rag*, of *Dippermouth Blues*, of *Working-*

man Blues, or the Paramount and Okeh versions of *Riverside Blues*, the quality and size of this music begins to take shape for us. Perhaps the most fruitful of all the comparisons we can make is among the three versions we are lucky enough to have of *Mabel's Dream*. Because of their likenesses and differences they clarify for us so many of the things that the group could do. Because of Oliver's part in them, they expand our ideas of his abilities.

Two of them were made successively for Paramount records and both happily got released.[1] The other was recorded the same month for Okeh.

Basically *Mabel's Dream* is a multi-thematic rag-like (or march-like) jazz performance, i.e. a rag played as if it were a blues. The second theme (the first amounts only to an introduction) is based on an intriguing little descending phrase intermittently completed by *ad lib* 'breaks' supplied in performance by clarinet and trombone. One can well imagine the origin of such a phrase in a ragtime piece, but the clipped *rhythms* of rag-

[1] A reliable rumour has it that unreleased alternate 'takes' of Oliver Paramounts exist in 'master' records and will some day be issued. A less reliable rumour says the same is true of some of the Gennetts.

time are not in this performance. The three recordings treat this section in more or less the same way, even to the melodies in breaks themselves—except that in the Okeh version the orchestral texture is denser, perhaps because the tempo is faster. The interesting part for our purposes comes with the closing theme.

Basically the two Paramount versions take the same approach, a remarkably 'classic' approach, one like Morton's. There are three choruses of the trio and they make a developing set of related variations.

Let us say that the lead cornet here is Oliver throughout the three; that is the consensus of opinion and, as we shall see, the music on the Okeh version all but confirms it. The theme has melody closely tied to its harmony: it is impossible to hum it without the simple underlying chords springing into one's head—and such themes lend themselves easily and readily to the kinds of variations jazzmen made in the twenties—think of the popularity of *Wolverine Blues*, say, and the drastic melodic departure Johnny Dodds is able to make from the third strain on Morton's trio record of it; or think of the last strain of *Froggie*

Moore. Here, the entrance of this selection is appropriately a theme-statement by the cornet lead. Departures from a strict statement of the melodic line are there (and if we don't catch them at first a comparison of the two versions will bring them out), but they are simple. The second chorus is a variation in melody and rhythm, or rather melody-rhythm, since it is as clear an indication of the relationship of these two in jazz as one could ask for. Oliver wants to *swing* this theme now and to do it he has both to reorganize its metres and recast its melodic line. The simplest device Oliver uses to do this is to accentuate the rhythm by note-doublings here and there. But the first Paramount version (master #1622–1) shows that Oliver has also partly reduced the theme to a bare minimum of notes which suggest its outline, has taken the 'open' places in the melody (places where there are sustained notes or no notes) and filled these in with original, very blues-like, melodic fragments. One could see this as a distillation of the melody plus an obbligato, both played by the same man. But it is far more fruitful, because of what follows, to see Oliver building a new melodic line out of a bare outline of the old. Naturally,

along with the greater rhythmic emphasis and the transformed melody, the feeling in the passage is changing, but this is as if to prepare for the next variation. One could only call it a melodic-emotional variation. Such a coinage is not so naïve as it may sound. Oliver has now transformed the initial theme into an original *blues* melody, and to deliver this final and most drastic departure he uses his wa-wa mute; he has re-composed a rather naïvely optimistic military strut into a plaintive yet dignified blues. And if one looks even more closely, some other details of the way Oliver has broken up and redistributed the original melody can fascinate. The simple structure of the theme is delivered in spurts of two bars, the basic melodic motif covers three bars plus a rest of one bar. In building a new theme out of this Oliver ties units together and puts his bar lines and rests at very different places. The often delivered dictum that early jazzmen were victims of brief, mechanical phrasing ignores the wonderful ingenuity which they always showed within their idiom—and, of course, that kind of mastery of one's idioms and *use* of its conventions is the source of art, never the conventions themselves.

In the second Paramount version of *Mabel's Dream*, Oliver uses basically the same pattern on this trio section. The theme is first stated with a few blues-like interpolations which prepare us for what is to come. In the second chorus he swings the melody more, simplifies it and departs from it further. In the third he builds a new melody. The really ingenious thing here is not so much that this third chorus (or 'second variation', if you will) is different from the one Oliver had improvised a few minutes before. (It *is* different and, I am inclined to think, superior.) But it is also the almost inevitable result of what Oliver had been building all along in this version. If one now re-plays this whole section and compares it to the first, one gets some idea of how comprehensive a musical mind Oliver could show. In the first take, everything from the slight changes and little interpolations in the theme-statement and the improvised changes in the first variation seem to prepare almost inevitably for just the kind of melody Oliver built up in the last chorus. In the second take, Oliver ends up with a very different final melody preparing for it beforehand just as logically, with different sorts of embellishments

and departures which lead to it. He was 'thinking' three choruses then, making them a continuous developing unit, and, apparently within a few minutes, making two very different things of the same basic material and following the same general plan.

Jelly Roll Morton did use the same generally 'classic' plan of variation 'in sets' but comparing Oliver's first two versions of *Mabel's Dream* shows a growing looseness and freedom—at least in rhythm—compared to Morton. Morton undoubtedly went far (and it can be quite far as a comparison of his records of several of his pieces will show); Oliver also went far in his way. And the point perhaps is that neither tried to go so far that he did not retain his own sense of order and form.

Once we have begun to absorb these two takes of *Mabel's Dream*, the Okeh comes as a surprise. The tempo is faster, and the group's sure handling of this different tempo makes the same composition into something different. To put it simply, what had been a march transformed into a plaintive blues now becomes a faster march transformed into a sprightly and thickly polyphonic dance

or 'stomp'. The first and second strains, which are rather stodgy on the Paramounts, here take on more life and Baby Dodds's liveliness almost makes up for brother Johnny's mechanical runs. Early in the record Armstrong announces what he is up to by flashing through with easy replies to the group.

The trio strain is handled as an improvised polyphonic interplay between the two cornets, with Oliver in the lead, which gradually increases in complexity and density until, at exactly the right moment and in precisely the right way, Johnny Dodds enters his upper register in the last chorus and makes it a three-part interplay. The almost immaculate timing and pace involved in these three choruses, the subtle discipline involved in the most spontaneous event, and the firm artistic sureness with which the most exciting pitch is handled and then topped can make so many of the ensemble passages in recorded 'dixieland' seem the strained and noisy naïveté of amateurs. (Would that we had an alternative 'take' of *this* version!)

We may hear and enjoy a lot of things about this group without any such exercise as the fore-

going, but such comparative listening does help us to hear more and to understand more, and once having done it, we can never never go back, I think; we can never again hear this band without a better hearing and broader and deeper delight in its art. Then, we not only enter into the different versions of *Riverside Blues* but we are unlikely ever to be able to play *Canal Street Blues* without discovering something new in it.

2

AN INTERIM NOTE ON OLIVER'S PLAYING

One can discuss many of the merits of the Creole Band without discussing its members very much. Indeed, one almost has to because, as we say, its virtues are the virtues of a whole greater than a sum of parts. But, one cannot discuss Oliver's subsequent bands and career, nor his effect on others, without discussing Oliver's own playing. And immediately one encounters an obstacle: Louis Armstrong.

Armstrong's long-standing insistence that Oliver was his stylistic inspiration was strongly re-asserted in interviews after the death of Bunk Johnson. It was recently strongly confirmed by Lil Hardin Armstrong, but she also added that although Louis did play like Oliver while with him

(and, according to Oliver's own admission, better), that when Louis left him he played like no one had ever heard before.

Therefore, when Oliver's brilliant accompaniment to 'Sippie' Wallace on *Morning Dove Blues* seems technically a slightly simpler version of the one Louis Armstrong gave Bessie Smith on *St. Louis Blues* a few months earlier, we might reasonably speak of influence, but when very Armstrong-like ideas show up on *Jet Black Blues* (with 'Blind Willie Dunn') or when the cornet breaks through with such fire on *Deep Henderson* in the way Louis did with Erskine Tate or Perry Bradford, we cannot really be sure of who influenced whom. Nor can we be sure when, as Maitland Edey points out (*The Jazz Review*, August 1959), Armstrong sounds like Oliver on the first chorus of Trixie Smith's *Railroad Blues*. We should remember, surely, how many people marvelled at Bunk Johnson's choruses on *When The Saints Go Marching In*; so like Louis, they said. Indeed, they were right because, as Bunk privately admitted, he had taken a lot of what he played from Louis's record of the tune. The basic ideas in Oliver's *Willie The Weeper* (April 1927) variation are the

same as those in Armstrong's (May 1927). Master and pupil? Perhaps, but what had Oliver perhaps heard Armstrong do with that piece in Chicago before April 1927? We cannot be sure.

Inevitably, when one discusses Oliver with musicians one of the first points they will make is that Oliver was 'a master of mutes' (that's the phrase that is usually used). Trombonist Preston Jackson, in that first story on Oliver in *Hot News* put it more tellingly: 'Later on, about 1914, I should say, Joe began to improve a lot. He used to practise very hard. I remember he once told me that it took him ten years to get a tone on his instrument. He used a half-cocked mute, and how he could make it talk!' His 'wa-wa's', his piercing cries, were not the crude or haphazard attempts of a musical semi-literate to play (and to imitate the human voice) expressively by bastard and essentially non-musical means. They were the careful and deliberate personal techniques of a sensitive and innovative player-artist. 'The almost unbearable anguish of King Oliver's horn' (as John Martin called it) was something he worked long and carefully to be able to project.

Another and perhaps more crucial point Jackson

made immediately followed: 'He played the variation style too; running chords I mean. His ear was wonderful—that helped a lot,' and trumpeter Louis Metcalfe has said that Oliver first made him aware of chord structures and of playing on them!

Here, I think we have something crucial, for the *way* in which Oliver 'ran the chords' is important. He could have known chords or learned them well enough from many Creole-trained musicians in New Orleans. But in the blues and rag-like themes which he recorded, he did not use an arpeggio style as Jimmy Noone so often did; in none did he simply 'open up' chords by playing the notes in them as they passed. Oliver, as Dodds often did, or even Lester Young did, used the intervals to *write* new or variant themes while improvising. His imagination was melodic-rhythmic in short—as is Armstrong's. This may perhaps seem a bold technical statement to be making of a man who has left few records but simple blues of eight, twelve, and sixteen bars and rag-march themes of sixteen or double-sixteen bar sequences, and whose harmonic sense was hardly complex. But on his level, Oliver might have

stood for a lot of other things; Noone[1] did stand for one other and that one could have been a defeating one for many players to adopt. Oliver did stand for *melody* in improvising. Since he stood for honest emotion as well, he stood for music and not technique. And since he stood for a special integrated rhythmic content too, he stood for jazz.

Standing for jazz he stood, in part, for himself and, as we shall see, that means that his music always had a dimension of dignity and of pride.

Perhaps it is that which makes our discussion of his techniques worth while.

[1] Of course, Noone's beautiful blues choruses on Ollie Powers's *Play That Thing* is one of several exceptions to my characterization of his work here. And as his records with Oliver (*Chatanooga Stomp*, *New Orleans Stomp*, *London Blues*, and *Camp Meeting Blues*) show, his knowledge of harmony and his Creole-based dance rhythms could make him a uniquely effective ensemble player.

3

THE DIXIE SYNCOPATORS

The first thing that strikes one about the records by The Dixie Syncopators is the unevenness.

A man who had been so sure of his conception and had led a band so sure in its execution, now seemed unsure, and results vary widely. The second thing one realizes is that on these and subsequent records, we learn what kind of player and soloist Oliver was and what his solos have to tell us.

The general intention of the Syncopators is obvious enough: the Creole band's style much modified in part by borrowing a small saxophone section from the conventional American dance (or even parade) band.[1]

Now at the same time, Fletcher Henderson was

[1] A comparison among several versions of *Dippermouth Blues–Sugarfoot Stomp* helps clarify this relationship (see below). A comparison of the versions of *Sobbin' Blues* by the Creole Band and the Syncopators, however, does not —although it may be said to clarify the superiority of the former group in personnel and conception.

working on a similar problem: how to transform a conventional dance band into a jazz band. But Henderson worked from the other direction; although on some early records he directly imitates Oliver's Creole band, Henderson's real career begins when he takes a dance band and tries to make a jazz band out of it. Oliver, who had a jazz band, wanted to keep it that, while he borrowed a section from a conventional dance band.

Curiously, both men failed in similar ways. Henderson stuck it out—luckily he could—until he had it finally licked about 1934. Oliver continued to fail in certain respects and he again changed his approach gradually in the late twenties. But for both, there were several individual and exemplary successes.

(To continue, for the record, on the formulation of 'big' bands, unlike Henderson's conversion of a dance group into a jazz group, Ellington began at a different point. For it was not until he had a 'show' or 'pit' band to convert into a jazz orchestra that Ellington began to find his way. Benny Moten, profiting by both the work of New Orleans men (Oliver, Morton) and by Henderson, made a jazz band from a dance band which was

made, in turn, out of a brass band. Count Basie was *not* the heir to Moten's conception, however, Jimmy Lunceford was. Basie, guided by Walter Page's Blue Devils and profiting greatly from a simplication of Henderson's work, built up a big jazz band from the small south-western jump-blues group.)

There are some moments in the earlier Creole Jazz Band records which we must simply bear with —they are the dated things like the chime effects on *Chimes Blues*, the silly slide whistle on *Sobbin' Blues*, but they are not failures. The Dixie Syncopators' records are full of strange failures: rhythmic heaviness and unsureness in percussion and horns, poor ensemble playing (poorly intoned and poorly unified), passages which do not swing at all between passages which do, players who suddenly trip over themselves and lose their way rhythmically; solos which swing for four bars, then don't swing for six, then do for two, and solo styles which flounder badly.

Certainly jazz *was* in the midst of a rhythmic change with Armstrong now in the lead, and many men did not know which way to turn to, old or new rhythms. And just as certainly other bands with

intentions like Oliver's were having similar problems with reeds and with unity. But there seems to be more involved than that. At any rate, there seems to be *much* more involved when one hears the successes in this series. How could there *be* such success, we repeatedly ask ourselves, when, in general, this group sometimes seemed to have so little firmness of guiding principle or end—or even awareness of means.

Some kind of answer may come when we realize that several of the more successful recordings by the band (or bands, actually, since there were many personnel changes) were arranged by alto saxophonist Billy Paige, who was briefly in the group and recorded with it between 11 March and 26 May 1926. Paige arranged both *Too Bad* and *Snag It.* In them and in the other recordings which work, the rhythmic momentum (if not rhythmic style) of the Creole Band is maintained, the sax section is *used* but not (as in the failures) as if it were the centre and virtue of things. There is a minimum of cluttering 'effects' and the players seem to know where they are going from the start of a number.

Several of the records are well worth discussing in some detail and in order. *Too Bad* is a good arrange-

ment and performance. Its fast tempo is controlled and it is used: the tempo does not use the players. The brief theme (by Billy Meyers and Elmer Schoebel) saves itself from a harrowing harmonic monotony by its rhythmic variety; the marvellous Charleston syncopations at its beginnings are, like soliloquys or chorus lines which tap-dance, as irresistible as they are 'old-fashioned'. Even Barney Bigard's slap tongue sax fits the airy generosity of the piece and performance. The firm pride with which Oliver's horn re-enters at the end gives the performance an emotional balance and depth which shows the sound intuitions of an artist at work and reveals just what kind of artist Oliver was. Not a first-rate record, *Too Bad* does almost set a standard for handling tempos in this new style, and it does make possible a later *Wa Wa Wa*.

Snag It (the first or 'vocal' version) is a success for similar reasons. It has little waste and a firm purpose. It also has variety. It is all very well to say that the 'breaks' chorus in this record was 'influential' if one doesn't mean only that it shows up in the mid 'forties in a Lionel Hampton pseudo-boogie woogie record. Perhaps the real point of this performance again is Oliver. His playing has a

passion and a dignity which saves what might otherwise have been a mere series of effects; notice, for example, how he completes both the break and 'call and response' (riff) choruses in the last few bars of each by gradually converting their basically tricky raw materials into what are really lovely blues melodies. Again, it is a double level on which they are working—of surface 'style' and deeper feeling—that makes the good Syncopators' recordings good, and, again, it is largely Oliver's emotional power and his skill at using it which gives one of those levels its existence. The later version of *Snag It* (the one without the vocal chorus and sometimes issued as *Snag It* #2) is hardly up to this one, and it fails chiefly because Oliver does not play well on it.

Perhaps *Deep Henderson* reveals something of the crisis in the orchestra. Luis Russell has a piano chorus on it: rhythmically it is like pseudo-ragtime, emotionally it is shallow, melodically it is, like several of the arrangements Russell did for the group, a series of tricks used to no real end even as tricks.[1] Oliver's strong horn pierces through it

[1] I do not intend these remarks as an estimate either of Russell's talent or subsequent career, only of his performance here.

marvellously and so like the Armstrong of 1923–26.

Jackass Blues is a fine case in point of Oliver's abilities. His solo is very simple and made of a few very simple things, yet it is a work of art. Basically, what he does is take several of his *Dippermouth Blues* (*Sugarfoot Stomp*) phrases and piece them together in different order. That order is compositional, it is in this case not a re-statement or paraphrase of the theme but the creation of a new one, and it is a melodic and emotional whole—a new essence. Is some of it (perhaps a lot of it) simply a use of 'traditional' blues melodies as are many blues solos of the period? Does that matter? As it is and where it is on this recording, the solo is the statement of an artist. In a slightly different form or from another man it might indeed have been a cliché.

Sugarfoot was recorded about a month later. A comparison between it, Oliver's two earlier versions of *Dippermouth*, and Henderson's early *Sugarfoot* records is the best basis I could have for my earlier arguments about the conception of this band and that of the 'Creole' group and Henderson's. This Syncopators' recording has several fine things about it, and some not so fine but interesting things as well. Among the latter is the way Albert Nicholas

begins with his version of Johnny Dodds's choruses and then immediately converts himself into his real idol, Jimmy Noone. Both fine and interesting is Kid Ory's way of making a 'bass' instrument (for such it is in earlier polyphonic styles) into a solo horn by using blues ideas several trumpeters (including Armstrong—hear *Gut Bucket Blues*) were playing at the time. Towards the end, Ory 'calls' the group to riff pattern 'responses' and the figures Ory plays are in the basic pattern for almost all trombone section writing in orchestral jazz until the 'forties. Oliver on this record is weak, shaky in ideas and execution and sounding as though he is 'faking' notes by forcing breath and embrochure. When Oliver is weak like this, and he became so increasingly but with recoveries, there is a pathos in his playing that draws us to him, but we had better be clear that this is *not* an aesthetic response, but a personal one. We are only pulling for the man; we do not respond to what the artist can reveal.

So many of the successful things on the earlier records that work seem to prepare for *Wa Wa Wa*; indeed, it all but perfects what *Too Bad* conceived. And Oliver's own role in it begins where *Deep Henderson* leaves him and fulfils what that record

implies. It is probably the best record the Syncopators made—a fact which is all the more striking when one remembers how decidedly unique and nearly sublime Oliver himself can be on slow blues for *Wa Wa Wa* is a fast stomp. Walter Allen has remarked on the variety of muted and wa-wa playing here. The momentum of Oliver's rhythm throughout is given the most telling kind of confirmation in the way that Nicholas loses swing in his break but Oliver and Bob Schoffner do not at all. Certainly there are clichés here, even clichés of awkwardness like the sax section work and there is a clarinet trio. But nothing *en route* could stand in the way of the purposeful power of *Wa Wa Wa*—a kind of savage energy sublimated and transmuted by conscious craft into a fearless joy of living. (Could the man who made this record have made the corny *Farewell Blues* a year later? He did.)

Again, one cannot be sure about the influence of such playing on Armstrong, but one should say that each man made something rather different out of the general approach. But one is more than tempted to declare that such rhythmic drive as Oliver shows here had its repercussions everywhere. Of such a thing as the striking, behind-the-beat

coda on *Tack Annie*, so like Armstrong's style, and also the one Bunk Johnson showed in the 'forties, one cannot say, except that it is there.

Someday Sweetheart and *Dead Man Blues* were public successes, Oliver's best-sellers. (They were coupled on opposite sides of the same release and of course Morton gave it out that *Dead Man* caused the sales.) The former was arranged by Luis Russell and is, in performance at least, a combination of *schmaltz* and the kind of honesty that gives *schmaltz* the lie. Again, Russell's rhythmic conception is raggy: Oliver could carry such rhythms (understood them as well as his own newer ones) without sounding corny and superficial but Bert Cobb's statement of the theme on tuba (for all its *outré* sound today) seems shallow. Oliver plays the verse of the piece with the rhythmic ease at shifting accents and making delays of a near-innovator, an ease that no one else here was up to, not even Johnny Dodds. Dodds does 'save' the performance, however, by a beautifully honest (though hardly humourless) response to Barney Bigard. Bigard's theme statement is corn and not in the modish sense—he is not so much old fashioned as he is false in emotion and affected in manner.

Dodd's clarinet manages both honesty and *bravura* at once, in a way that only he (and perhaps Verdi) knew about, in his re-statement of the theme. The melody itself is ideally suited for such an irony, for if one does not take a jazzman's advantage of the way its rhythmic accents fall (as Dodds does), its melodic contours *could* lead him into the worst kind of turn-of-the-century music-hall sentimentality.

Jelly Roll Morton's Victor record of the same piece (complete with violins that are both heavy and lush) is just that kind of mawkishness. But with his own *Dead Man's Blues*, Morton made one of his three or four orchestral masterpieces, and one which could have shown both Oliver and Henderson most of what there is to know about how to get reed sections to play with unity and swing. But Oliver's record was the hit. It doesn't survive; it is fast enough to be downright coy, whereas Morton managed sadness, optimisim, wit, and depth all in one three-minute complex unit of both device and feeling. Oliver leaves us with only a fairly academic appreciation of Bob Schoffner's behind-the-beat solo.

One can only feel of *Willie The Weeper* that its effort at variety in arrangement is simply affected

and misguided (Morton was often more complex in fact, far less so in effect) and only draws attention to itself and that there are poor solos. If Oliver was not imitating the outline of the solo Armstrong was to record a few days later, then Oliver must have been imitating himself, and not very well.

By the time one gets to blues *Speakeasy* and *Aunt Hager's*, things are clearly running out for the Dixie Syncopators. The personnel has changed over and over, the conception of the scores is floundering and confused, and the emotional dimension that almost any Oliver solo might give almost any record is not present, for Oliver does not solo. One cannot be sure what these arrangements intend: the earlier Syncopators idea of a modified New Orleans group, the idea of a small ensemble playing scored themes and effects around a string of solos (like the Clarence Williams records of the time), or of a big 'pre-swing' band conception that was beginning to emerge in Harlem and that Oliver was soon to flirt with. Only a reed riff on *Speakeasy* survives. Ed Anderson is the trumpet soloist on both. One can only say that he does very well at elaborating a style like Oliver's, one that the most advanced younger men had already aban-

doned for another style (i.e. Armstrong's) which Oliver's had already inspired.

But before those two records were made there are a succession of three other more or less slow blues, *Black Snake Blues*, *Tin Roof Blues*, and *West End Blues*, and they show the band's range of failure and success.

Black Snake uses Omer Simeon (he took up soprano saxophone just for the arrangement) to advantage, but hardly to the near-brilliance that Morton did—it is quite possible that Simeon was always a better ensemble improviser than soloist. Ory manages again to be both witty and deeply serious. Oliver's opening is sure and the slightest technical shakiness of his final chorus is fully overcome by his dignity and force. *Black Snake* is one Luis Russell arrangement for the Syncopators that does manage variety without clutter, but it is variety of a rather pointless sort, a variety of several good effects within a score, but with such little attention to over-all pattern. If the total effect of such writing is good, it is almost an accident.

I do not know why Frederick Ramsey Jr. insisted in *Jazzmen* that *Tin Roof Blues* was taken from Oliver's *Jazzin' Babies Blues*. It was not, although

George Brunis did use a fairly commonplace bass-tuba theme that is on the *Jazzin' Babies* record as the basis of his solo. At any rate, Oliver's 1928 *Tin Roof* is hardly distinguished except for Oliver's very lovely solo at the end of it.

One cannot say, however, that the original Oliver record of *West End* is undistinguished or even careless: it is simply bad. It is incongruously bad; one hardly knows how it was intended or how to take it. Oliver obviously made it up with care of two distinguished blues themes, the second of them harmonically lovely and quite provocative for an improviser. Oliver opens the record with a rhythmic archaic chorus for some reason. When we then hear Ernest Elliot's confused burlesque of a clarinet solo (it is made up of blues clichés and Ted Lewis-like whinneys), we hardly know what to think. And when Oliver's ending is so beautiful, so proud, and so honest, the listener's confusion is confounded.

I have hinted at, spoken of, and even pointed to certain obvious rhythmic crises in the Syncopators' records on which I shall now try to take a stand. There is far too much of the kind of rhythmic momentum cum suspense which we call 'swing' in, say Jelly Roll Morton's records, for me to take the

position that swing must be based on an even 'four' time sense, but clearly there is a rhythmic difference between, say, Morton and Armstrong (or for that matter, between Morton and Bessie Smith). Oliver could *swing* in a rhythmic mode based either on a modified 2/4 rather like Morton's, or a mode based on an even 4/4 like Armstrong's—indeed he may have adopted the latter from certain kinds of 'low' blues playing and passed it on to Armstrong. I believe he did. Oliver swings for example in both parts of *Tin Roof*, in all of *Wa Wa Wa*, or *Too Bad.* Nicholas uses the more ragtimy 2/4 rhythmic conception on *Wa Wa Wa* but there does not swing. Morton did not *always* swing; neither did Oliver, but the question is not merely that of an underlying 2/4 or 4/4 time sense. Furthermore, a man may keep perfect *time* and not swing (example: Charlie Shavers) and he may swing beautifully and have imperfect time (example: Jo Jones).

One further point about the Syncopators deserves attention. There is an assumption in many circles that jazz has gradually achieved a rhythmic lightness over its fifty years. As a generalization it is valid enough, I suppose, but in detail it is hardly true. The Creole Jazz Band, despite a preponder-

ance of rhythm instruments and an overlapping of their functions (one example bass, trombone, and piano bass-line) had a rhythmic lightness, sureness, spring, and ease, that one does not often hear either in the rhythm section or in the horns of the Syncopators. And the rhythmic lightness that Morton achieved on certain Red Hot Pepper records has all the aspects of a controlled miracle. But the Syncopators, like so many early medium and large groups which used arrangements, had a usually heavy and sluggish rhythm section which affected most of the horns. That it seldom affected Oliver himself is a sign of the size of Oliver's talent in jazz. But one other aspect of that rhythm is even more striking. Its lack of flow is so much more evident where it shouldn't have been by all reasonable expectations: on slow and medium blues, and it is less evident where it might have given trouble: on fast numbers. *Too Bad* and *Wa Wa Wa* can dance with such relatively rhythmic movement and dash, yet slow blues like *Black Snake*, say, in a tempo which gives even the untutored 'folk' musician no rhythmic trouble at all, often have a dull, heavy and unmoving pulse thumping away in them.

4

KING OLIVER 'AND HIS ORCHESTRA'

It is often said of Oliver's 1929–30 Victor recordings that in effect many of them were made by the Victor bosses rather than Joe Oliver. This is undoubtedly true of such things as *Everybody Does It In Hawaii* with Roy Schmeck's guitar, but the majority of the numbers on them were written by Oliver and/or Dave Nelson, and by Paul Barbarin or Luis Russell, and were scored by Nelson.

Perhaps the first thing that one notices is the polish of the groups. The reeds play better, with more unity and better intonation, the rhythm sections are usually firmer and more integrated with the groups, the full ensembles are more unified. But, except for those times when Oliver had the nucleus of a working group (which would include trombonist Jimmy Archey), these records were made by groups assembled for the dates or working

bands of other leaders borrowed in part or whole by Oliver for records. Obviously, these men were musicians with standards of professionalism, but one must admit that the soloist sometimes does not meet the standards of feeling which some of Oliver's earlier side-men, for all their bungling, had set. And there are many of the same problems with swing in the solos, except that now the soloists will have their own rhythms set and maintained and those rhythms will either swing or not swing. There is little tripping or faltering within choruses as with some of the Syncopators' soloists.

Perhaps more important than any of this is a change in conception that soon becomes evident. It is hard to say how much pressures from the Victor company to get records which would sell well influenced things—or how much Oliver might have been affected in some ways by the same desires—but one can say that on the whole these records have more devices of scoring and approach which are dated than his others. The Syncopators' failures may be failures of execution not of score. The same sort of dated scoring mars some of Jelly Roll Morton's records of the period, but that would not be said of his earlier records nor of

most of Oliver's. Henderson and Ellington might have failed in these same years, but most of the time their conception seems to have been on the right track. Oliver's often was not. For example it is difficult to understand what a *mélange* of devices like *I Can't Stop Loving You* intends, unless Oliver was convinced (or had been convinced) that for popularity one should do what others did and not what one did best. At any rate, it was several years before Don Redman and Jimmy Lunceford, in their different ways, perfected the kind of thing that *I Want You Just Myself* attempts, and to do it each of them had to bring about considerable transmutation into jazz of the 'dance band' devices he employed.

Even more important is further evidence already hinted at above, that Oliver was gradually changing his basic approach. He usually kept his instrumentation the same: two or three brass, two or three reeds, and rhythm. But less and less did his approach sound like a modified New Orleans ensemble with reeds for clarinet; more and more did it sound like a cut-down version of the New York 'big band' of the period.[1] And as we have said, it was a band

[1] One might object that the musicians available could play no other style, except that most of them have before or since.

in which the worst elements of style of the 'hotel' dance band of the time were used directly without their being really transformed or assimilated into the jazz idiom.

Also, one must remark on Oliver's own playing and especially since the Victor contract began with three record dates on which Oliver did not play at all—and on the first of which Louis Metcalf did an imitation of Louis Armstrong's innovative recording of Oliver's earlier composition *West End Blues*. In 1929 and 1930, King Oliver might follow a recording on which he did not play with one on which he played very well, and follow that with one on which he falters technically and seems to be forcing himself badly. That is about the best that one can make of the difficult tangle of Oliver's cornet and trumpet solos in these years.[1] He could follow dates with no solos or simple, quiet ones by taking those really bravura solos on *Too Late* and

[1] Almost any musician will say of Oliver that, until he finally had to stop playing the cornet, he would play less and less frequently, but that when he did solo, he could play well. Lester Young, who may have been with him as late as 1933, has said so, and Keg Purnell says his lip was still good in 1935. On the other hand, his lip may *sound* very bad on some of the 1929 records and sound excellent a few days later on another record date. Any horn player has bad days, of course, but Oliver seems to have had extremes. (The switch from cornet to trumpet came about 1930.)

New Orleans Shout for himself. But it is that kind of pride that he was made of.

Sweet Like This is one of the most celebrated of the Victor series and it deserves to be. It has no startling improvisation and it has a bit of rather bad writing and playing for the reeds (behind the first trumpet solo), but has two charming themes and it seems to know what it intends to say without the waste motion of many of these records. The themes themselves again show that art is a matter of how one handles one's conventions no matter what those conventions are. For the themes are again the blues, one twelve- and one sixteen-bar blues, and Nelson and Oliver have fashioned two themes of touching, almost nostalgic, lyricism on these cliché patterns, and themes which also complement each other excellently. (I believe, incidentally, that it is Oliver who plays the first solo on open trumpet—the theme statement—and Nelson who plays the simple muted variation—although Allen, Rust, and Hughes Panassie have it the other way around.)

Too Late, the next side from the same date, is also a good one and an even better arrangement in the reed-work. Actually, it again returns to the

sixteen-bar blues for still another use, for its thirty-two-bar theme is the kind made of what amounts to splicing two sixteen-bar sequences together. Its ending, with probably Oliver playing solo in his fast stomp style over excitingly executed riffs figures, is one of the best things in the Victor series.

The other record from this date is what is surely one of Oliver's loveliest later pieces, *What Do You Want Me To Do*, and it has Oliver's lovely obbligato to a theme-statement by tuba, but it is another of those arrangements in which the effort of the times to use the whining 'sweet' 'hotel-band' saxophone style[1] in a jazz setting does not work as jazz. The truth may be, as I say, that in 1929 nobody really knew what to do with three reeds in a jazz band—or that those who did, did not always do what was best. Certainly, Oliver was alone neither in the attempt nor in the failure, but unlike the others, Oliver had a style before 1925 that was maturely a jazz style—but one, alas, out of fashion. Henderson, Redmond, and Ellington were working to transform such things into the language of jazz.

[1] The style may well be at least in part an effort at an 'adaptation' by 'hotel bands' of the jazz clarinet style of the 'teens and early 'twenties—but, then, so is Ted Lewis's clarinet style. We can hear it put to quite different use in what Lester Young made of Frankie Trumbauer.

Oliver, at forty-four, his major work (whether he knew it or not) probably already done, was stuck with them and (again, whether he knew it or not) with the times.

But not always, because for every *You're Just My Type* there are very successful records like Luis Russell's composition *Call of the Freaks*, Metcalfe's *Trumpets Prayer*, *Stingaree Blues* (with Oliver's memorable solo), *Mule Face Blues*, *Boogie Woogie*,[1] or *Nelson Stomp*. In composition, in scoring, and in performance these records take the best road available, the one that everyone would be on in about six years, and take it decisively and well. They are exceptional performances. And some like *Shake It and Break It* could even catch at least a bit of the joyous side of the stomps of an earlier time.

For some of the others, one can only hear and report; report that after the magnificent swing of the opening of *Olga*, it is abandoned for another kind of rhythm, a *mélange* of effects and mostly stodgy solos; or report that on *Rhythm Club*

[1] An unusual piece for Oliver, by the way, since it is in the thirty-two bar AABA, Tin Pan Alley form with B as a 'bridge' or 'release'. The piece has nothing to do with the kind of percussive blues piano which shares its name.

Stomp,[1] Charlie Holmes's clarinet solo (as usual) and the fine closing ensemble generate more swing than anything else which happens; or report that one *Frankie and Johnny* could (despite the burden of Roy Schmeck and an harmonica) create and sustain a good, almost barrel-house beat, while the stodgy one made fifteen days later has little to offer but Holmes again and Oliver's lead in the last chorus.

Oliver's Victor recordings are usually either dismissed or spoken of as the flounderings of an almost helpless 'old man'. But of about thirty-eight titles, at least ten are very successful recordings for their whole length and several others have fine moments. For some of the failures Oliver must ultimately take the blame, but when we remember that most of the records were made by 'pick up' bands, that for some of them he had 'commercial' gimmicks forced on him, that jazz was in a state of rhythmic and stylistic flux, and, above all, that Oliver was working with a comparatively new conception of orchestral jazz with which even his younger colleagues were having daily trouble and failure, ten such very good records made in 1929–1930 would represent real achievement for anyone.

[1] A tune by the way which perhaps should have got Oliver and Nelson royalties from *Old Man Mose* in the thirties.

5

JOE OLIVER, ACCOMPANIST AND SIDE-MAN

The Victor recordings represent Oliver's last recorded work chronologically except for a brief return to Brunswick for three dates, the third a pseudonymous one. Meanwhile, Oliver had worked as a blues accompanist and as a side-man on recordings since 1924. Many of these enlighten us about Oliver's style. On some of them he played very good solos, and two of them I think are, in some ways, among his best recorded work.

Oliver as an accompanist again presents us with contradictions like those we have often come across in this survey of his records: he will do something brilliantly on one occasion and seem hardly able to do the same thing more than competently on another; or, he will take one approach successfully on one occasion but take an entirely different one on another.

On the four Sarah Martin records that have been

reissued, *Death Sting Me Blues*, *Mistreatin' Man Blues*, *Mean, Tight Mama*, and the *double entendre* 'patter' song *Kitchen Man*, Oliver does not play simple 'replies' at the ends of her lines as would many others at the time. He often enters behind and under the singer's lines to begin his phrases, *completing* them as 'responses' at the ends of her lines. The effect, of course, is different: that of a continuous interplay and, finally, of an integrated balance between voice and instrument into an entity. But Oliver's playing here, largely muted and usually wa-wa, is often a matter of almost cautious plaintive sounds. Only occasionally does a phrase have a fuller melodic content and line, but those that do are lovely. That is also the approach Oliver took on his first accompaniments, to the vaudeville team of Butterbeans and Susie on *Construction Gang* and *Kiss Me Sweet.* Besides an introduction and an interlude of rather simple variation-on-theme by Oliver, there is some very full and here more melodic playing behind the singers.

Oliver's masterpiece of blues accompaniment, and one which can stand comparison with the best work of Armstrong or Joe Smith, is surely the *Morning Dove Blues* with Sippie Wallace. In the

first place, Sippie Wallace was, unlike Sarah Martin, a real blues singer with an expressive, even commanding voice. The blues itself is a very good one, even if the rest of it is not quite up to the poetry of its first stanza:

> Early in the morning, I rise like
> a mourning dove.
> Early in the morning, I rise like
> a mourning dove.
> Moaning and singing about the man
> I love.

The performance builds excellently. Oliver uses all approaches as part of a developing structure. He plays an introduction and, at first, replies and fills at the ends of the singer's lines. Each time, he comes up with a real musical idea, an appropriate one, and it is always expressively played. Gradually as the interplay between the two increases, Oliver's melodies will not only respond to her previous line but lead her beautifully into her next. Then, again gradually, he begins to accompany her lines beginning his phrases behind her, playing them in response to her, completing them by calling for her next line. In this single performance, Oliver has worked out the very delicate artistic problem of how a singer and accompaniment can

balance and mutually contribute to a performance without competing with each other. And he has done it without the effect of an exercise, but of a finished work of art. If there is anything that challenges the unique pace and evolving tension one hears on *Morning Dove*, it might be the way Sippie Wallace raises her voice in the final stanza of *Every Dog Has His Day*, a kind of paradoxical triumph-and-pain in one, as Oliver continues behind.

All of these recordings show, I think, how the vocal-instrumental blues was dealing with the very difficult problem of balancing poetry, singer, and instrument. There is always a clash among the three in any coming together they may have: the opera librettist knows he cannot make his lines too good or they draw too much attention to themselves as poetry. And the operatic composer knows he has got to balance his singers and his instrument so that one does not overshadow the others. And the so-called 'country blues' singer knows that he had best keep his guitar simple and appropriately functional for he is primarily a poet. If that kind of balancing of the arts of poetry-song-instruments has ever been better handled in jazz it is surely only on the best of the Joe Smith and Louis Arm-

strong accompaniments. The interplay of Lester Young and Billie Holiday in the mid 'thirties might sometimes surpass it in some ways, but there is no question of any 'poetry' in *A Sailboat In The Moonlight* (*And You*), so the problem has changed. And today for a Mahalia Jackson, the problem is even simpler. She is primarily a singer and both the verses *and* the accompaniment take second place to her voice and delivery. The most advanced blues artists of the 'twenties—writers, singers, instrumentalists—obviously solved a subtle artistic problem for themselves that few have even dealt with since—and which perhaps only German *lieder* solved before it. And George Thomas's *Morning Dove Blues* as performed by Sippie Wallace and Joseph Oliver is a classic, and almost self-explicating, example of what they achieved.

I do not think that many of Oliver's recordings with Clarence Williams's sometimes stodgy groups are successful—that is, that many of his solos on those records are the best Oliver. I do not say this of *all* his solos on them, and even the poorest of them give us some idea of how he played and all such ideas are valuable.

Oliver has one at the end of *Bimbo* (*I'm Gonna*

Take My Bimbo Back to Bamboo Isle) in which he has some delightful rhythmic and metric displacements. To put this performance beside the two versions of *Speakeasy Blues*, the one by Oliver's Syncopators with Oliver's solo and the one by Clarence Williams's Orchestra with a solo by Ed Anderson is instructive. Anderson plays the theme on *Speakeasy* with a great deal more freedom with the rhythm and metre than Oliver does but the origin of what Anderson does can clearly be seen, I think, in such things as Oliver's solo on *Bimbo*.

Also there may be a more plaintive feeling in Oliver's playing of *What You Want Me To Do* with Williams's 'Novelty Four', than there is on his own Victor record of that piece, but there is nothing on the Williams version to match the agility of Oliver's obbligato to Clinton Walker's tuba on his own.

However, there is one record with Oliver as a side-man which, I think, is in some ways among his best. It is the curious *Jet Black Blues* by 'Blind Willie Dunn and his Gin Bottle Four', apparently with Oliver[1], Eddie Lang and Lonnie Johnson, with, perhaps, Hoagy Carmichael.

[1] Oliver's presence on this record has been doubted. I am convinced that it is he, but even if it were not, the playing represents much of what he stood for, I think.

Oliver, as usual, presents us here with a contradiction. The playing, withal, does show straining and some faltering in technique. The record opens with Lonnie Johnson playing, with his usual feeling, a simple eight-bar blues theme rather like the classic one, *How Long*, as Eddie Lang answers him. Then with Lang in the lead, Johnson plays rhythm and there is that strangely appropriate pitched 'bell' sound entering behind. Now begins Oliver's part of the record: in effect four choruses, in two groups of two, each built on a variation of the theme that Johnson and Lang had introduced. Basically, Oliver's variant theme is made of eight notes, some of them at effective (albeit simple) intervals from those in the Johnson–Lang theme. In each of his first two choruses Oliver ties these notes together with interweaving runs. The runs themselves are virtually the same in each of the choruses; the interesting thing is that they make a climax, getting gradually more complex as each chorus proceeds. After a rather stilted piano solo and a 'scat' vocal chorus which just misses banality and which he quietly accompanies, Oliver re-enters for his second pair of choruses. He begins with a direct three-note reference to

his previous solo and then proceeds to build these two choruses as a variation of those earlier two. The germ idea before had been an ascending phrase; here it is a descending one. Here the higher notes give it both tension and, gradually, an optimism missing before. His fourth and last chorus *swings* the melody of his third; the optimism becomes almost a joy which dances now with the doublets and triplets and, as a climax, an Armstrong-like eighth note skipping around with the time and the rhythm at its end.

He said something almost like this I think: 'This is my music, the music I stand for. I am proud of it; I give it to you.'

So brief an account as this does not need a summary, I think. But Oliver's story does call for some kind of a conclusion: It is quite reasonable to contend that without Joseph Oliver, the feeling and form of his music and the techniques he found to express them, jazz could not have happened as we know it. But perhaps without the pride, the dignity, the fortitude, the hope, and finally the joy he gave it, it might not have continued as jazz at all.

DISCOGRAPHY

KING OLIVER ON MICROGROOVE

THE CREOLE JAZZ BAND

Riverside RLP12-122 contains *Chimes Blues, Just Gone, Canal Street Blues, Mandy Lee Blues, Weather Bird Rag, Dipper Mouth Blues, Froggie Moore, Snake Rag, Mabel's Dream, Southern Stomps, Riverside Blues* (Gennett).

Riverside RLP12-101 includes *Alligator Hop, Krooked Blues, I'm Going Away To Wear You Off My Mind* (Gennett).

Epic LN-3208 contains *Snake Rag, Mabel's Dream, Room Rent Blues, Dippermouth Blues, I Ain't Gonna Tell Nobody, Working Man Blues, High Society, Sweet Baby Doll, Sobbin' Blues, My Sweet Lovin' Man* (Okeh), *London Cafe Blues, Camp Meeting Blues* (Columbia).

THE DIXIE SYNCOPATORS

Brunswick BL-58020 (now deleted) contains *Black Snake Blues, Willie the Weeper, Aunt Hagar's Blues, Speakeasy Blues, Sugar Foot Stomp, Snag It No. 2, Someday Sweetheart, Too Bad.*

Brunswick BL-58026 (now deleted) included *Snag It.*

KING OLIVER AND HIS ORCHESTRA (Victor Recordings)

Camden CAL-383 includes *Freakish Light Blues* in-

correctly labelled *New Orleans Shout.* Other tracks by different artists.

"X" LVA3018 (now deleted) contained *West End Blues, I've Got That Thing, Freakish Light Blues* (takes 3 and 4), *Can I Tell You, My Good Man Sam, Sweet Like This, New Orleans Shout.*

MISCELLANEOUS RECORDINGS

Riverside RLP12-130 contains *King Porter Stomp, Tom Cat Blues* (duets with Jelly Roll Morton), *Mistreatin' Man Blues, Mean Tight Mama, Death Sting Me, Hole In The Wall, Kitchen Man, Don't Turn Your Back On Me* (accompaniments to blues singer Sara Martin as member of Clarence Williams Group), *Squeeze Me, Long Deep And Wide, New Down Home Rag* (with Clarence Williams Group—no solos).

Riverside RLP1033 (now deleted) by Clarence Williams has Oliver solos on *Bozo, Bimbo* and *Speakeasy Blues.*

Note: Deleted items are 10" LPs. All other records listed are 12" LPs.

KINGS OF JAZZ

King Oliver

BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

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